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## Book Reviews

Corum, James S. *Bad Strategies: How Major Powers Fail in Counterinsurgency*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2008.

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In *Bad Strategies: How Major Powers Fail in Counterinsurgency*, James S. Corum, currently on the faculty at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and an editorial board member of the *Journal of Strategic Studies* and *Airpower Journal*, provides a conceptual framework for how democracies can conduct effective counterinsurgency operations. Corum presents a series of four case studies that highlight failure, rather than success. For Corum, failure is more instructional. When insurgencies defeat democratic nations, he argues, there are recurrent strategic failures perpetuated by counterinsurgent nations. Corum attempts to examine these missteps through a contemporary lens of judgment, rather than “a perspective of we know now.” He concludes that the strategic miscalculations were not inevitable, but were implemented by national leaders surrounded by the wrong advisors. In the end, Corum provides policy makers and military leaders with a checklist of strategic “do’s and don’ts” for counterinsurgencies.

Corum chooses to examine counterinsurgency conflicts fought by France, Britain, and the United States. He explains that democracies are prone to fail in wars of insurgency due to their need for long-term public support in maintaining a military presence in a sovereign country. Democracies also feel constrained to fight within an established legal framework. Corum argues that these limiting factors have had major strategic implications, forcing democratic nations to conduct counterinsurgencies in dynamic settings. Both today and in the future, the ability of political and military leaders to adapt to an ever-changing tactical and strategic environment can be tantamount to success. Inversely, a lack of flexible political endstates, a rigid adherence to conventional military operations, and unwillingness to compromise with insurgent forces can spell disaster for democracies in wars of insurgency.

Corum’s description of France’s loss in Algeria is illuminating. He recounts how France’s military was surprisingly adept at defeating Muslim insurgents. By using a combination of regular forces, colonial and indigenous operatives, and the police, the French were able to militarily defeat the insurgency. However, political leaders in Paris refused to recognize the social problems in Algeria or adopt measures to enlist the support of a disenfranchised Algerian people.

Corum’s depiction of the British plight in Cyprus is equally interesting. Political infighting between competing foreign and colonial offices exacerbated an already tenuous British position

in Cyprus. Faced with an adversary that was well trained, highly educated, and experienced in guerilla fighting, the British quest for a decisive conventional victory only brought disaster.

Similarly, the United States' approach to Vietnam was doomed to fail. Efforts to "search and destroy" a technologically inferior, ideologically driven insurgent force only buttressed North Vietnam's legitimacy with the South Vietnamese public. Like Britain in Cyprus, the United States neglected political goals that might have brought a compromised end to the conflicts.

Corum's last case study is a scathing critique of U.S. strategy in Iraq between 2003 and 2007. He argues that three factors led to four years of failure – the military's neglect of counterinsurgency lessons from Vietnam, direct civilian control of military strategy and tactics, and a presidential administration unwilling to accept a pragmatic political endstate.

Although Corum's work is thoughtful and informative, it falls short in several areas. First, Corum does not explain why he chose these particular four case studies. Why focus on Algeria and Cyprus in particular? It is possible to infer from Corum's writing that both examples highlight a critical lesson that he deemed important, but Corum leaves this for the reader to decide. Second, Corum's narrative of the failures in Algeria, Cyprus, Vietnam, and Iraq is not new to historiography. He draws on mostly secondary sources to make his conclusions pertaining to the strategic blunders of France, Britain, and the United States. In addition, developments in Iraq during the past year have endowed *Bad Strategies* with a dated character. Corum completed the book in the fall of 2007 when the effects of the American troop surges and General David Petraeus's new Iraq strategies were uncertain. Corum is critical of the surges, stating that "after every surge the violence levels climbed again." Also, there is no mention of the Sunni Awakening that began in Al Anbar Province in late 2005. The combination of the surges and the Sunni Awakening, many argue, can be credited for the complete turnaround of the situation in Iraq. Corum fell into the trap of writing history when the events were still transpiring. This, however, did not go unrecognized, as Corum predicted such a shortcoming in his introduction.

Overall, *Bad Strategies* is a thought provoking analytical work that accomplishes its objective of providing a framework for developing counterinsurgency strategies. It is a must read for anyone attempting to understand the complexities involved in twenty-first century strategy-making.

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